

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost August 1, 2021

Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15; John 6:24-35

I was raised as a Lutheran attending St. Mark's Lutheran Church in Charlotte, NC through my college years. Part of the reason I went to seminary (the first time) at the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago in the mid 1990's was to figure out what a Lutheran was and if I was one.

It was not long after beginning my studies that I found that I was indeed a Christian who happened to be Lutheran. There are many reasons for this but the first is that our basic understanding of people and how the world works matches my own experience. Our tradition takes seriously the complexity of people and life. We acknowledge that all of us are this mix of saint and sinner. That the best people in the world have flaws, sometimes deep and disgusting, and that even the worst people in the world have qualities that are good, that might even be admired or emulated.

It also understands that in any given moment what we need to hear to save us might be the exact opposite of what we would need the next moment. This is law and gospel. Both of which are the content of the good news that saves us. Some moments, we need the law- to bring us down to earth and shock us into seeing truthfully. Some moments, we need the gospel- the even more amazing truth that for all our sin, all our faults as deep and disgusting as they are, God loves us enough to send God's son to die for us, so that we might have life in all its fullness and abundance.

Life, the life of faith in particular, is about the tension between these two things that seem opposite but are really sides of the same coin. And this is what underlies our texts today. Each focusing on one side of the coin.

Moses- prophet and leader of his people- the one whom God has sent to free them from enslavement. A situation where they did not have autonomy over themselves, their work, their bodies, their families. Moses, who has led them into the wilderness with the promise that at the end of the trip was life fuller and more abundant, a new land flowing with milk and honey and that following God would get them there eventually.

But the congregation of Israel is having none of it right now. They are hungry. Perhaps hangry. Hungry enough to deceive themselves about the circumstances of their enslavement, “Oh if only we were back in Egypt, enslaved- yes, but also able to eat our fill. Those were the days!” Really?

God’s response is not to criticize, but to send them bread and meat. The very earthly things that they need to physically survive. They are not wrong in that. God sends enough to feed and sustain. Enough for the day. God does this to get to the underlying issue, “to test whether they will walk in my instructions/commands or not.” Will they be faithful to God? Trust God enough to provide what is needed (food, shelter, what Luther calls daily bread) and get them to what will bring life?

Jesus provides a different kind of challenge to the crowd who has followed after him looking for the leftovers of the miraculous meal he served them in our reading last week. The basic choice Jesus places before them is this, “Do you follow me for what I provide, or for who I am?”

If it is for the tasty bread, the miracles, and spectacular stuff. For what following Jesus brings you. If this is what you are pursuing, you may get it... even a lot of it... but what will happen to it eventually? What happens to manna in the wilderness if you try and hold some over to the next day? It breeds worms and rots. This is the bread that perishes- is destroyed. The word used by Jesus is the same that is used to describe death.

Do you want what you get here and which cannot go with you? Do you follow Jesus because of what practical and earthly things you think he provides- propositions, wise sayings, meaningful parables, strong moral foundation? Things that help us. Feed our hunger. But ultimately stop there. Or do you follow for who Christ is- the truth of who God is, the wellspring and source of life. A life fuller and more abundant, more vibrant, than anything else we can create ourselves.

Do you follow to receive all the intangibles that come from relationship with God and with one another? To participate in God's math which says that in giving ourselves away to others we will receive far more than if we gathered all the bread in the world into our arms.

I have experienced both sides of this coin these past couple of weeks. I have been a means for God to provide daily bread to Charles. A tow, a car fixed, a place to stay, some food to eat. Things that were a visible sign of God's love for him. Things that were, daily bread, the "enough" he needed to get to the next day. To live through this moment.

In the giving, in the closeness to Charles, I entered into his life and his challenges. I saw his flaws and foibles and he got a chance to see mine. And we're both better for it. Having seen the truth of each other and

knowing that we were both rising above that. That somehow in the mix of that relationship the whole was greater than the sum of the parts that we were as individuals.

I also got to experience being on the receiving end of that kind of love, as members of this assembly shared generously when asked to help make possible that tow, the car fixed, a place to stay, some food to eat. A moment when what mattered was that there was a human being who was in need, and we, together, could be generous enough to provide what was needed- daily bread, manna in his wilderness.

Friends, all the things of this world will fade away. Like manna held over for tomorrow. The stuff accumulated over a lifetime will be auctioned off because nobody wants it anymore. It's out of style. Who reads those books or needs those tools? I'm convinced that the collection of experiences is, ultimately, just as fruitless. These things are manna- good to sustain us- but nothing worth spending our time accumulating more than we need.

What lasts to eternity. What saves, is Jesus. God's Word come down to us. God's best self-expression to us. Come to love us back into life. Come to remind us that we are made to be in relationship- with God and with one another. Loving relationship, giving relationship.

This is the One who calls God's people out of enslavement- to the Egyptians, but also out of enslavement to our own desires; for other things, for power, for wealth. What saves, what lasts to eternity, is what Jesus calls us to. A life lived in pursuit of the good of our neighbor. A life lived in devotion to the God who has created all that exists. Who provides the air

we breathe, the blue sky above, the crops we eat. A life lived with enough of that which will perish (food, shelter, clothing, the material things of life) and filled to overflowing with that which endures even beyond our last mortal breath. Love shared, companionship, wisdom, laughter.

God is the coin- both providing the everyday stuff we need and reminding us we are called to something beyond just that. God feeds the hungry, because they need food. God sends Jesus, the bread of life from heaven, because we need life. Life beyond what mere bread gives. Life vibrant, satisfying, full. Life lived in relationship with God and with all those who are made in God's image.

Life found here- in the assembly of those imperfect believers who sometimes hoard their manna- but just as often are inspired by the Holy Spirit to share it generously. Life found in the words of scripture and hymns. Life found in the service of others. Life found in humbling ourselves to come to God in prayer and say- please, thanks, help.

Come join us in this journey of life. And be fed by the very bread from heaven, the visible sign of God's love for you. Jesus. God's Son. Our Lord.